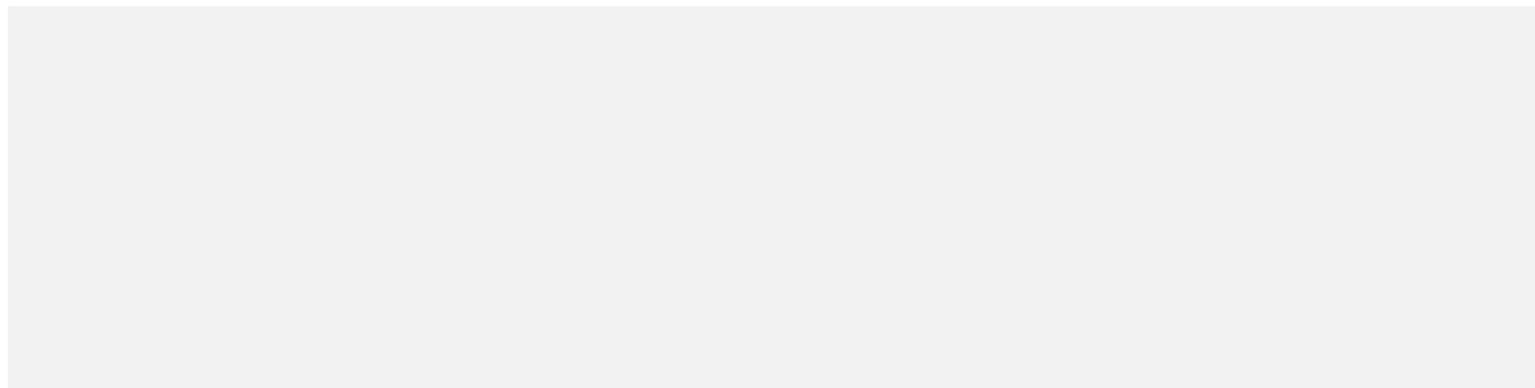


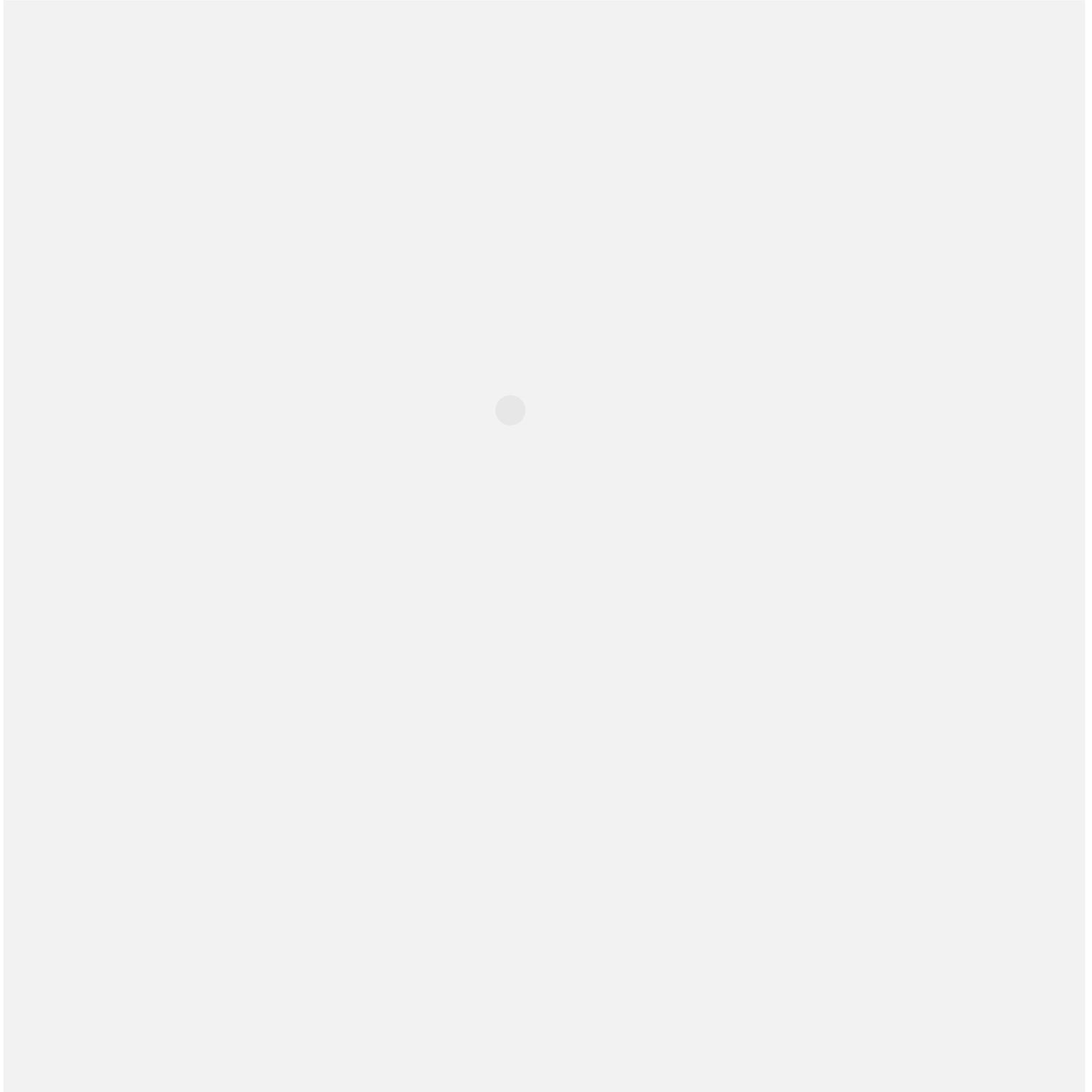
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By Robert Feder

Nov. 12, 2010, 5 a.m. CT





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If Kevin Metheny wasn't the worst program director in the history of Chicago radio, I don't know who was.

*Kevin Metheny and Jim Laski in a fond embrace*

Arrogant, aloof, stubborn and contemptuous of the legacy he'd inherited, the man known as "Pig Virus" nearly destroyed one of the greatest brands in American broadcasting by alienating hundreds of thousands of loyal listeners and breaking bonds of trust that had endured for more than 80 years.



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Never has a station fallen so far, so fast in public esteem — all because of one man who took pride in dealing dishonestly with his employees and audience alike. "Truthfulness is only an added benefit when it happens to drop into your lap," he famously told his staff in a memo that turned up on this blog one year ago last week.

On Thursday afternoon — three weeks after his mentor and protector, Randy Michaels, was ousted in scandal as CEO of Tribune Co. — Metheny was fired as program director of news/talk WGN-AM (720). Flushed out with him was the worst of Metheny's unfathomably awful hires, convicted felon and radio rookie Jim Laski, who'd been hosting evenings since last spring.

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At Metheny's behest over the past two years, WGN fired, lost or demoted some of Chicago's most talented and popular personalities, including Steve Cochran, Kathy O'Malley, Judy Markey, Bob Sirott and David Kaplan. Poor John Williams was shuffled around so many times listeners never knew where on the schedule he'd show up. Others who could have made a difference, such as Jonathon Brandmeier and Richard Roeper, wisely sized up the situation and walked away.

Worse yet were Metheny's hiring moves. Laski was a joke. Others he brought on had no affinity for Chicago whatsoever, with morning host Greg Jarrett from San Francisco and midday host Mike McConnell from Cincinnati topping the list. Their edgy, aggressive posture seemed utterly at odds with the civility and honesty that the station had always represented. (Only by a quirk of luck was WGN spared a right-wing wacko named Bill Cunningham, whom Metheny also tried to hire from Cincinnati.)

When WGN's audience rejected his new hires, Metheny blamed the listeners for failing to "figure out how to interact with someone with an opinion." His solution was to air fake calls. "Our legacy listeners seem to leave our new talent hanging out to dry... I'd like to prime the pump with a few more clued-in callers," Metheny wrote in a memo in which he secretly solicited Tribune Co. executives to deceive the audience by pretending to be ordinary listeners.

Even the marketing slogan Metheny inflicted on the talk station — "News 720" — was an outright lie.

King of All Media Howard Stern had the guy nailed more than 25 years ago when Metheny was his program director at WNBC-AM in New York. It was Stern who coined the nickname "Pig Virus" for Metheny (which later morphed into "Pig Vomit" for the movie "Private Parts"). Metheny "would memo me all these idiotic rules and ideas he had, [and] he came up with this complicated terminology to make it sound as if he knew something, but it was all mystification," Stern wrote in his best-selling memoir.

It's true that Tom Langmyer, vice president and general manager of WGN, was responsible for firing Metheny and Laski. But I'm not quite ready to declare Langmyer a hero either. Whatever private misgivings he may have had while everything was going on, Langmyer played the consummate company man throughout, publicly supporting all that Michaels and Metheny did to WGN and

its employees.

Even in his announcement of the shakeup Thursday, Langmyer declared his support of Jarrett and McConnell — both of whom reportedly were hired with little input from him. “We’ve solidified our daytime lineup, which now features Greg Jarrett, Mike McConnell, John Williams, and Garry Meier, and we’ve improved our news coverage as a result of our growing partnership with the Chicago Tribune,” Langmyer said in a statement. Not exactly the grand declaration of a new day for WGN.

Then again, given all the damage that’s been done, whoever leads WGN in the future will face a difficult if not impossible challenge. “At some point, this will be a case study of how to dismantle a radio station,” respected veteran media buyer Paula Hambrick told Jim Kirk of the Chicago News Cooperative last summer.

Of all the prophecies made in the last year, none resonates more than one from Metheny himself, who told WGN free-lancer Margaret Larkin on her “Radio Girl” podcast: “You attempt to create improved ratings at a place like WGN circa 2010 at some peril, because it’s possible to screw things up and do damage as you attempt to take preemptive, decisive action.”

Well, at least we can all agree on that.



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